HOW SWEET IT IS
Psalm 133
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

There used to be a moment on television that intrigued me for some reason. It came at the very end of the old Jackie Gleason Hour, one of the last of those marvelous variety shows which included a little music, dancing, and all sorts of comedy - outlandish, slapstick, none very subtle. I still chuckle at the thought of Ralph Cramden and Ed Norton. At the end of the hour Gleason came through the curtain to meet his audience: still working brilliantly he would introduce everyone else on the show, the audience applauding wildly. And at the very end, with the cheering at its crescendo, he would shout, "How Sweet It Is!" And it was. There was something special, something contageous about the fact that that group of people was so caught up in the experience they had just shared, something almost mystical in the unity of that moment. It communicated well. I still remember it. "How Sweet It Is."

It is always remarkable when people get caught up in something larger than themselves, when individuality can be submerged in the unity of a group engaged in some common activity or experience. We know now the power of that phenomenon. Cultural anthropologists and psychologists are still shaking their heads over what happened when a fanatic Austrian paperhanger got behind a microphone, and with expert lighting, brilliant banners, stirring music, turned the dispirited individuals of a defeated nation into the demonic ferocity of the Third Reich. We know now about the power of a group of people willing to submerge self for the sake of the state, or party, or ideology.

But we also know about its sweetness. Who will ever forget the extraordinary experienc of the Bicentennial? Coming after the agony of Vietnam, the humiliation of Watergate, it brought the nation together to celebrate a common heritage. Or, how else to explain the extraordinary affirmations of National unity which occurred at the time of the hostage release early this year? Human unity is always a special experience. It has always been a major portion of the lure of sports, as participant and spectator. Competitors in team sports know, first hand, the discipline but special joy of submersing self in a common goal Spectators become part of that experience on a grand scale as the National Hockey team wins the Olympic Gold, or as your child's Little League team loses a close one. It is part of the secret shared by people who served in the military, and it is part of the enduring appeal of fraternity and sorority.

Most of us have attended a family reunion. Most of us know that the older one becomes the more important a sense of family is. Many of us who live away from our extended families, and who encounter aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins rarely, know in a unique way how sweet it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity.

> "It is like the precious oil upon the head,
> running down upon the beard.
> It is like the dew of Hermon
> which falls on the mountains of Zion!..."

That's an old man and old woman, 2500 years ago, after a large dinner, surrounded by sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters, together after a long separation. That's a family, laughing and reminiscing and teasing and mingling the tears of joy with deep affection and loyalty. Psalm 133 - a "Pilgrim Psalm", the scholars tell us, written for holiday pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to keep the feast. It looks back to a much earlier time, however; the days of the wilderness wandering, those heroic days when the tribes entered and conquered the land. In those days families lived together - literally, in one tent. It was the key to survival: father, mother, sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, lived together. It is the source of Judaism's legendary emphasis on the family.

"Those were the days" I can hear an old patriarch saying - "those were the days when families were really families." When the Psalm was written and used in Israel, families were settled and scattered somewhat. But on the high holy days, entire families would go up to Jerusalem together. They would meet on the way, and as religious pilgrims, they would, once again, live in one tent. Can't you imagine how they must have looked forward to that, and how marvelous it would have been? And at the end of the day, when they had eaten and talked and laughed, the old people would say, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity. How sweet it is to be together."

It reminded them,of course, of a broader family than their own even: the household of Israel. It reminded them that God's people are a family. And it hinted at one of the pivotal ideas which would evolve out of Judaism and plant itself in Christianity as well: the essential unity of the human race: the family of humankind. It began modestly with their growing understanding that Jahweh, their God, was not merely another tribal deity but in fact the creator of all people, the Lord of all nations. That's one of the most importan ideas ever conceived. Before, gods were attached to, almost the personal property of, the tribe. Deities represented the tribe and vice versa. No one ever questioned that. When one tribe defeated another tribe, everybody knew that their gods had struggled together too. But here is a people loosening their grip on their own god and hinting at least that he is not personal property, that he has no favorites, that all people are his children. It is an important idea historically. It is an important idea in contemporary terms as well.

In Lent particularly, season of penitence, season of ashes and honesty, it is a reminder that we move mostly in the opposite direction. We do not fashion tribal gods of course. Our intellectual sophistication has eliminated that. But we persist in denying the unity of the race.

Ironically, it is technology, not our theology, that has made us a global village. Instant communication, high speed transportation have made the globe accessible but also have made tribalism, chauvinism untenable and there was a time when western civilization regarded a continent undiscovered until Portugese of Spanish explorers walked up on the shore. We can't continue to think like that. If the entire world population could be represented by a group of one hundred people, we Americans, after all, would be just six of the one hundred. In isolation that isn't significant. But it is terribly important in a world now totally interrelated. The gap between the wealthy members of the human family and the poor members is increasing. Guatemala, El Salvador, whatever else they may be, are signals that the wealthy part of the family cannot forever ignore that gap. The stakes are high now and they get higher with every new dollar spent on armaments. Pope John Paul visited Japan recently and at the Hiroshima memorial said: "Humanity must make a moral about-face. From now on it is only through a conscious choice that humanity can survive." The relationship of this nation's military strength to the dynamics of international realities is highly complex. It may be that increased military strength is the path to peace. If so, may I submit that at least part of our responsibility as Christians is to be honest about it and to weep over the fact. Lent is a sobering reminder that evil is still real: that the human family is still fractured: that the most marketable political idea around is still chauvinism: that evil exists in our world not because of the Devil's complicity, but almost always because people live like you and me,who value - above all else - our comfort and security, allow it to exist.

The old pilgrim Psalm reminds me that love for others is central to our faith. It reminds me that all the Presbyterian theology and all the fundamentalist piety in the world amounts to nothing more than the brittle, abrasive crashing of a cymbal; hollow noise - until it eventuates in love. It reminds me again that the grandeur of this church in God's eyes has to do only with the love, reconciliation and healing it generates in the world.

It reminds me on this day particularly, as we come to table, of another table gathering of friends, in an upper room. It reminds me of how like that group we are - fractured, tired, discouraged sometimes, hanging on but in our more reasonable moments admittedly skeptical about the plausibility of this faith. It reminds me of how Jesus, on that occasion, stunned them by washing their feet and in case they failed to understand, by articulating it - the new commandment - "that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you love one another."

The ancient Jews understood the experience of unity as a gift of God. The disciples of Jesus, as they reflected on it, concluded that the only unity they ever experienced was given to them by a man who knelt in humble service and washed their feet. And nearly a century later, in a small Christian community in Asia Minor, an aged saint wrote it down, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we have loved the brethren."

What we have to offer the world, I think, is something deceptively simple. It is this: full human life happens when we learn to love. And we learn to love when we know how deeply and profoundly we have been loved. "All loving", Helmut Theilicke has observed, "is a thanksgiving for the fact that we ourselves have been loved."

The Good News is this - we are - each one of us, loved of God. We are loved, as part of a family - and as individuals. Real life - eternal life - is to know that and, in gratitude for it, to love the family and embrace the unity that has been given.

Perhaps the greatest temptation for middle class American Christians like you and me is the oldest; namely, to conceive of God as our tribal deity: to continue the ancient fragmentation of the human family: to trivialize the faith by simply refusing to be honest about what it has to say about human relationships.

Let us not succumb to that gentle temptation. Let us be strong enough to bear what judgment falls on us. God has an alternative scenario for His creation and for our lives. God has in mind something other than war and violent revolution and alienation and unhappiness. God does not intend starving children and homeless families. God has a vision, a plan, a program. Some call it naive. I suspect its truth is so searing, so burning, so true, we can't always bear it.

It's very old...listen to it again.

Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!
It is like the precious oil upon the head,
running down upon the beard,
upon the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the Lord has commanded the blessing,
life for evermore.

(Psalm 133).

Amen.